“What do we say when we say “God”: a foundation for the Ophidian religious grammar”

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Abstract:

This paper is aimed at describing the philosophical and theoretical nature of fictional nouns, especially considering the analysis proposed by the philosophical theories of language during the XX century, in the context of a broader analysis of the name “God” within the context of the ophidian practice. Given an introduction on the main linguistic theories on fictional contexts and empty names, the paper suggests a new semantics of God through the adoption of the main elements previously proposed by philosophers as E. Paganini, S. Kripke, K.L. Walton.

Introduction

Let us consider the sentence “God is good”: in the minds of most of us, this sentence appears to possess a truth value. In short, it is true. If, on the contrary, we say “God is evil”, this statement seems to be false. Yet, as has already been shown elsewhere, proper names sometimes lack meaning in the Fregean sense[1]; that is, they do not refer to any object and, in such cases, they possess no truth value.

How, then, can we justify the fact that certain statements referring to so-called empty names strike us as true, while others strike us as false? What do we actually refer to when we say “God” or “Satan”?

These are the questions this study will attempt to address by exploring the field of the philosophy of language devoted to fictional objects and by seeking to understand what the relationship between language and metaphysics might be, if such a relationship exists at all.

The origins of the debate can be traced back to the theory of Alexius Meinong, an Austrian philosopher active at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His *Gegenstandstheorie* [theory of objects] is well known and particularly useful for understanding the debate on fictional objects. According to Meinong, every human thought is intentional[2], that is, directed towards a specific object. Let us imagine, for instance, one of our confrères absorbed in prayer before the

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[1] P. Casalegno *et alia, Filosofia del linguaggio,* Raffaello Cortina Editore, San Giuliano Milanese 2003, p.15

[2] E. Paganini, *Oggetti e personaggi fittizi: un dibattito filosofico contemporaneo*, Carocci, Roma 2019, p.28

altar, or an immense temple, or even a golden mountain[3]. In all these cases, our thought, according to Meinong, is directed towards a determinate object, even though that object may appear to us as non-existent.

The core of Meinong's theory lies in the claim that the objects of thought are not immanent but transcendent. Meinong rejects the idealism that was developing during his time and adopts a more materialist outlook, viewing the objects of thought as something entirely independent of our capacity to think. If we examine the objects described by Meinong, however, we immediately notice that some exist and others do not: "a confrère absorbed in prayer" exists, whereas a "golden mountain" does not.

This observation does not trouble Meinong, who recognises certain objects as non-existent and claims that some objects of thought are not only non-existent but even metaphysically impossible. Meinong's example is the round square, which is metaphysically impossible insofar as it violates the principle of non-contradiction. Meinong is therefore willing to accept that some objects exist and others do not, while maintaining that all objects "are".

Here we encounter the distinction between "being" and "existing"[4]: the former is a property common to all objects, whereas the latter belongs only to some of them. Among objects that lack the property of existence, we can further distinguish between *possible objects* and *impossible objects*. It is thus clear that, for Meinong, objects are characterised by a set of properties that allow us to distinguish them from one another.

In a certain sense, the Austrian philosopher thus takes up Berkeley's modern view[5], according to which objects are nothing other than the bundle of their constitutive properties. It is therefore unsurprising that Meinong's theory was subjected to fierce criticism, precisely because of its frequent violation of the principle of non-contradiction[6].

In the case of possible objects, let us consider the example of the golden mountain. This object should be constituted by three properties: being a mountain, being golden, and existing. But, as is evident, no golden mountain exists, so we would be faced with the following situation: "it is the case that the existing golden mountain exists and that the existing golden mountain does not exist." Once again, this would constitute a violation of the principle of non-contradiction.

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[3] ibid. p.29

[4] cfr. M. Heidegger, *Being and Time,* any edition

[5] cfr. R. Grossmann, *Meinong*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1974, pp. 2-4

[6] About this criticism moved by Russell, cfr. E. Paganini, *Oggetti e personaggi fittizi: un dibattito filosofico contemporaneo,* Carocci, Roma 2019, pp.30-31

It was only in the 1970s that Meinongian theory was taken up again in response to the growing debate on non-existent objects. In light of the opening example, it would be far simpler to justify the apparent reference to "God" as a thought directed towards an object endowed with properties.

The dilemma, in brief, lies precisely in the fact that some statements involving empty names or non-existent objects strike us as correct, while others do not. Meinong's theory, despite its flaws, succeeds in explaining why some assertions concerning such objects appear to have a truth value: because the objects towards which our thought is directed, whether they exist or not, nonetheless possess properties.

Existence, as we have seen, is merely one of the properties of the objects towards which we direct our thought, and it is precisely on this point that Russell's criticism of Meinong focuses. In responding to this criticism, neo-Meinongians distinguish between properties that are essential to an object's constitution and those that are not. The former are known as nuclear properties, while the latter are referred to as extra-nuclear properties[7]. Among these are properties such as "existing" or "being possible".

With the introduction of this distinction—already suggested by Meinong himself towards the end of his life—it becomes possible to overcome Russell's criticism, at least with regard to possible non-existent objects. The problem surrounding existence, however, lies in the ambiguity of this property. This constituted the second proposal advanced by neo-Meinongians to escape Russell's critiques without adopting the distinction between constitutive and non-constitutive properties outlined above.

To understand what is meant by the ambiguity of a property, let us consider the following example: "There's a seal on my letter paper" where the predicate "being a seal" can have two possible connotations, one pointing at the animal living in the arctic regions, the other meaning the metal mark used to close letters with melted wax. It is quite obvious that, in this specific case, the meaning of the aforementioned predicate is the second one, having no sense the existence of a seal (i.e. the animal) on a piece of paper places upon my desk. Consequently, the statement does not violate the principle of non-contradiction, precisely because the predicate "being a seal" is ambiguous. For Meinongians, existence is equally ambiguous. Consider the following statement: "The existing golden mountain has the property of existing and the existing golden mountain does not have the property of existing (2)."

In this case, it is possible to distinguish two different meanings of "existing", following Rapaport's proposal[8], by distinguishing between *Meinongian objects* (objects towards which our thoughts are

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[7] E. Paganini, *Oggetti e personaggi fittizi: un dibattito filosofico contemporaneo*, Carocci, Roma 2019, p.35

[8] W. J. Rapaport, *Meinongian Theories and a Russellian Paradox,* in "Noûs" 12, 2, pp. 153-180

directed and which are constituted by their properties) and *actual objects* (objects independent of our thoughts, identifiable through their properties). The implication is clear: if we accept Rapaport's view, we must admit that for every real object there corresponds a Meinongian object to which our thoughts refer.

The Problem of Meinongian Inferences

Another problem we encounter when adopting a Meinongian perspective concerns logical inference. We call an inference a statement in which, from two or more true premises, a conclusion that is likewise true follows. In other words, the truth of the premises forces the truth of the conclusion.

Let us consider a practical example:

(P1) Zeus lives on the highest mountain in the world

(P2) The highest mountain in the world is Everest

(C1) Zeus lives on Everest

This inference is valid, meaning that from two true premises a true conclusion follows. For the evaluation of an inference's validity, it is not necessary for all its elements to be true[9]: they could all be false and the inference would still be valid. Truth, by contrast, requires that true premises lead to a true conclusion. To summarise: an inference is valid provided there is no mismatch in truth value between premises and conclusion; it is true if and only if true premises yield a true conclusion.

The inference above is therefore both valid and true, since two true premises lead to a true conclusion. And yet, none of us has ever seen Zeus living on Mount Everest. How can this paradox be explained?

According to D. Lewis[10], who first raised this issue for neo-Meinongians, the only way to overcome the paradox is to abandon the literalism with which Meinongians treated object properties, and to adopt a less literal approach. In short, premise P1 should be considered within the context of fiction, while P2 should be considered within the context of reality. Only in this way can we avoid the apparent contradiction whereby the inference is true, without being true.

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[9] E. Paganini, *Oggetti e personaggi fittizi: un dibattito filosofico contemporaneo*, Carocci, Roma 2019, p.12

[10] ibid. p.40

Extensional Language

When we speak about something that is true in our world, we use extensional language[11], in which every expression may be replaced by another with the same extension without altering the truth value of the statement as a whole. This principle is known as *salva veritate*. For example: Robert Francis Prevost is a human being.

"Robert Francis Prevost" has the same extension as "the Pope of the Catholic Church elected in 2025", and "human being" has the same extension as "featherless biped"[12]. In this case, extensional language allows us to substitute the expressions in the original statement with these equivalents, yielding: The Pope of the Catholic Church elected in 2025 is a featherless biped.

The truth value of the statement does not change.

A non-extensional language is instead called intensional; we speak of such language whenever the substitution of expressions does not guarantee the *salva veritate* principle. Intensional language is generally introduced by modal operators such as "it could have been the case that". Consider the following example: (1) It could have been the case that Robert Francis Prevost was not the Pope of the Catholic Church in 2025. This statement is clearly true, since Prevost's election is a historical contingency that might not have occurred. If, however, we substitute the expressions as before, we obtain: (2) It could have been the case that the Pope of the Catholic Church elected in 2025 was not the Pope of the Catholic Church in 2025.

As is evident, the presence of the modal operator "it could have been the case that" makes it impossible to preserve the *salva veritate* principle in such an intensional language.

However, we must distinguish this example from the following case: The Pope of the Catholic Church elected in 2025 could have not been the Pope of the Catholic Church in 2025. This statement is true. As in case (1), Prevost's election during the 2025 conclave was a historical contingency that might not have occurred. The *salva veritate* principle is therefore preserved here.

In addition to modal operators such as "it could have been the case that", we should also mention belief operators as introducing non-extensional language.

For example: (1) Jennifer believes that Satan is the God of Origins. Now, "Satan" has the same extension as "the punisher"[13]. Substituting the expressions yields: (2) "Jennifer believes that the punisher is the God of Origins."

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[11] ibid. p.44

[12] In this regard, the reported example is the same of the one reported by E. Paganini in the text in bibliography.

[13] cfr. S. Sannino, *Introductory Treatise on Ophidian doctrine: apology of a rational and speculative monotheism,* Amazon 2026

But Jennifer may not know that Satan is the punisher, and thus the resulting language is not extensional. Moreover, the two statements may contradict one another.

The modal operator "according to the such-and-such story" likewise introduces intensional language. And again: (1) "According to Greek tradition, Zeus lives on the highest mountain in the world". But "the highest mountain in the world" has the same extension as "Mount Everest", from which it would follow: (2) "According to Greek tradition, Zeus lives on Mount Everest". Once again, we are dealing with a language that does not preserve the *salva veritate* principle.

The Dialectic of Possible Worlds

Saul Kripke[14] introduced the dialectic of possible worlds as a potential solution to non-extensional language. The notion of a possible world, far from having epistemic or physical significance, is extremely useful at the logical level for avoiding the typical problems of intensional language discussed above.

For a possible world to exist, it needs only satisfy two fundamental logical principles: the principle of non-contradiction (it is not the case that A and not-A) and the principle of the excluded middle (either A or not-A)[15]. Once these principles are satisfied, we may assume that such a possible world exists. But what is a possible world?

We should imagine a possible world not as a planet somewhere in our universe, but as an entire universe with many—if not all—characteristics different from those of our own. There may thus be a possible world in which Jennifer, who believes that Satan is the God of Origins, can fly. The fact that Jennifer flies in a possible world does not contradict the fact that, in our universe, her biology prevents her from flying. Let us now consider the truth values of certain statements within the framework of possible-world semantics:

(1) It is possible that the Satanic race exists.

(2) It is necessary that the Satanic race exists.

In case (1), the intensional operator "it is possible that" requires that there be at least one possible world in which the Satanic race exists for the statement to be true. In case (2), the Satanic race must exist in all possible worlds. If there exists even a single world—including our own—in which the Satanic race does not exist, then the statement will not be true. We thus introduce the distinction

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[14] cfr. S. Kripke, *Vacuous names and fictional entities,* in Id., *Philosophical Troubles: collected papers,* vol. I, Oxford University Press, New York, 2011, pp.52-74 and S. Kripke, *Reference and Existence: The John Locke Lectures,* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013

[15] E. Paganini, *Oggetti e personaggi fittizi: un dibattito filosofico contemporaneo*, Carocci, Roma 2019, p.47

between “it is possible that X” and “it is necessary that X”: in the former case, X must be true in at least one possible world (possible truth), whereas in the latter it must be true in all possible worlds (necessary truth).

The reader should not be led to believe that Kripke’s notion of possible worlds provides a loophole for asserting the existence of things that do not exist in our world. On the contrary, possible-world semantics was devised to explain fictional objects and the truth value of statements that involve them, not to justify delirious claims about non-existence.

Having introduced the dialectic of possible worlds, we can now begin to formulate definitions of fictional truth based on the considerations developed thus far. The difficulty in defining what is true within a fiction—and therefore what is expressed by the presence of the modal operator “in the such-and-such story”—lies precisely in determining what this “such-and-such story” is.

Numerous authors have attempted to provide an adequate definition of truth in fiction, with varying results. A first observation is that authors of fiction generally do not intend to refer to objects in our world when they refer to fictional characters or objects. Our world must therefore be excluded from the definition of fictional truth, as it is not useful for understanding it. In short, the author in our world pretends to recount an event that occurred in another possible world.

Lewis[16] thus proposed the following definition of truth in fiction, which we shall see is nonetheless incomplete: “P is non-trivially true in the fiction S if and only if P is true in those possible worlds in which the story S is told as known fact, rather than as fiction.”

The crucial point of this initial definition is that fictional truth is narrated by someone who experienced the narrated events, rather than by someone who merely pretends that they occurred. We must, however, make a further observation: there are truths that we import from our world into the context of fiction. For example, when we read *War and Peace*, we take for granted that the characters share with us a number of characteristics not explicitly mentioned by the author; we assume, for instance, that Prince Andrei Bolkonsky has a nose, two eyes, and a mouth. Intuitively, we must therefore exclude those possible worlds that differ too greatly from our own, and consider only those most similar to it.

Lewis’s proposal thus becomes: “In the fiction S, P is non-trivially true if and only if some worlds in which the story is told as known fact and P is true differ less from the actual world than worlds in which the story is told as known fact and P is not true. ‘In the such-and-such fiction, P’ is trivially true if and only if there are no possible worlds in which the story is told as known fact.”[17]

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[16] ibid. p. 55

[17] ibid.

Finally, it is necessary to introduce one last specification, following the line presented by Professor Paganini in her work. It appears that some fictional truths reflect the beliefs prevalent at the time they were written. To clarify this point, I quote the author in full:

"For example, in Conan Doyle's *The Adventure of the Speckled Band*, Sherlock Holmes solves a murder case by establishing that a venomous Russell's viper climbed a rope and bit the victim. However, based on recent studies, it has been recognised that such snakes cannot climb ropes, and some have therefore claimed that Sherlock Holmes did not solve the case. What should we conclude from these observations? If we accept that the story should be read in light of the beliefs shared by most people at the time it was presented to the public, rather than on the basis of facts about the world unknown at the time of composition, then we must modify the definition of truth in fiction. Lewis's revised proposal is the following: 'In the fiction S, P is non-trivially true if and only if, for every possible world in which the shared beliefs of the community in which the fiction originated are true, the worlds in which the story is told as known fact and P is true differ less from our world than worlds in which the story is told as known fact and P is not true. "In the fiction S, P" is trivially true if and only if there are no possible worlds in which the story is told as known fact." [18]

From this final definition, we are able to draw a comprehensive outline of the boundaries of fictional truth, taking into account all the implications such an inquiry entails.

We have already mentioned the influence our world exerts on other possible worlds, and in particular on the possible world in which our fiction is told as known fact. At this point, two kinds of truth must be introduced to complete the framework we have outlined.

We shall speak of *intra-fictional truths* for all those truths that propagate within a single fiction, and of *inter-fictional truths* for those truths that propagate from one fiction to another.

Reading *Le Livre Rouge*, we find that many demons are described as horrifically violent and of putrid, terrifying appearance. We therefore assume that other demons share these same characteristics, even if they are not explicitly mentioned. This is a clear case of intra-fictional truth, that is, a truth that spreads transversally within a single narrative.

Now suppose we are confronted with a drawing depicting a witch. The witch is not holding a broom, yet we assume that she has one, perhaps stored in a cupboard or leaning by the doorway, because witches traditionally have brooms. What we are doing, then, is importing a truth from other fictional contexts and adapting it to the fictional context before us. This is a case of inter-fictional truth. In both cases, however, fictional truth is substantially modified by what we take for granted on

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[18] ibid. p.54

the basis of that same fiction or of other fictions featuring the same objects. This consideration can only further complicate the very notion of fictional truth.

De dicto and *de re* Beliefs

The discussion so far is not sufficient to demonstrate unequivocally that, within the context of fiction, the objects to which we refer exist in other possible worlds. There are, in fact, cases in which intensional language does not allow for the identification of an object. We speak of *de dicto* belief for statements that report a belief as the subject would express it, and of *de re* belief for statements that involve a belief about a particular person or object.

In the first case, we have a statement such as: Jennifer believes that Robert Francis Prevost is evil.

In the second case, we have: Robert Francis Prevost is such that Jennifer believes of him that he is evil.

In this case, even if the belief itself is false, it is nonetheless possible to identify the subject falling under the name "Robert Francis Prevost".

Now suppose that Jennifer holds a different type of belief, expressed in *de dicto* form: "Jennifer believes that her theoretical speculation is the only true one".

If we attempt to transpose this statement into *de re* form, we obtain: "The only truth is such that Jennifer believes of it that it is hers".

In this case, however, it is impossible to extract the definite description "the only truth", because Jennifer's belief is based on what she believes, rather than on a specific object. An unequivocal and incontestable truth does not exist, and thus contradicts Jennifer's belief.[19]

What Do We Refer to with Fictional Names?

The key to our problem lies, as already mentioned, in the extreme difficulty of identifying possible worlds in the context of fictional truth. When we consider proper names such as "Sherlock Holmes" or "Anna Karenina", the problem becomes even more acute. To whom, exactly, are we referring?

There are two main theories concerning fictional proper names: descriptivism[20] and the theory of direct reference. The former derives from the ideas of Frege[21] and Russell[22], and holds that every proper name refers to a definite description with the same extension.

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[19] In this regard, please cfr. ibid. p.54

[20] ibid. p.59

[21] A. Kenny, Frege: un'introduzione, Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi, Torino 2003

[22] P. Casalegno *et alia, Filosofia del linguaggio,* Raffaello Cortina Editore, San Giuliano Milanese 2003, pp. 43-56

For example, the proper name "Satan" refers to the definite description "the accuser angel of the Judaic tradition". The theory of direct reference, by contrast, maintains that proper names are introduced into a linguistic community through "baptism". Consequently, when we say "Jennifer" or "Anna Karenina", we are making a direct reference to the person baptised with that name.

It is evident, however, that within a possible-world framework such as the one presented here, the theory of direct reference encounters significant difficulties. First, it is impossible to determine who the person baptised with that proper name is. We cannot know whether, in a possible world, there is exactly one person who possesses the same characteristics as Anna Karenina; and if there were more than one, it would be equally impossible to determine to which of them Tolstoy refers when recounting, as known fact, the events featuring this character.

Likewise, even if we assumed that the decisive factor were the identification of a possible world as similar as possible to our own, we would still be unable to distinguish among all the individuals who possess the characteristics attributed by the author to Anna Karenina.

Real and Unreal Fictional Objects

We have already seen that theories concerned with the analysis of fictional objects are not only numerous, but often mutually contradictory. It should therefore come as no surprise that, at this stage of the debate, the issue becomes increasingly complex depending on the perspective one adopts. We shall first introduce the Platonist[23] view and then the Creationist[24] one with regard to fictional objects, before finally addressing the question that lies at the heart of our investigation and, more specifically, the need within Ophidism to confer substance upon the signifier "God".

According to the Platonist theory, abstract objects exist independently of the actions of the author of fiction, who merely identifies them. We may therefore state with a certain degree of confidence that, within the Platonist framework, fictional language, while failing to identify a specific object, succeeds in referring to the relation established between two objects. That is to say, through fictional language one does not identify a specific individual called "Sherlock Holmes", but rather understands and describes the relationship that the object "Sherlock Holmes" bears to the world or to other persons.

In order to fully grasp this notion, it is necessary to understand what the Platonist tradition means by a fictional object. The philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff[25] was the first to propose a plausible

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[23] E. Paganini, *Oggetti e personaggi fittizi: un dibattito filosofico contemporaneo*, Carocci, Roma 2019, p.65

[24] ibid.

[25] cfr. N. Wolterstorff, *Works and Worlds of Art,* Claredon Press, Oxford, 1980

theory defining the nature of fictional objects from a Platonist perspective. With regard to Wolterstorff's theory, it is useful to quote in full the passage cited by Professor E. Paganini:

"[…] when we read *Dead Souls* by Gogol, we gain access to a certain description of Russia; for example, we encounter the following description: 'as in enlightened Europe, so too in enlightened Russia there are many respectable people who never dine in a tavern without exchanging a few words with the waiter'. Russia is a country that actually exists, and therefore the name 'Russia' [26]refers to the country Russia both inside and outside the fiction; however, the description associated with Russia in *Dead Souls* may not in fact be satisfied by the existing Russia. Russia may, for instance, not be a country in which many respectable people exchange a few words with the waiter when dining in a tavern. When we read *Dead Souls*, we come into contact with a set of properties that are associated with Russia, and through these descriptions we can grasp a certain type of nation. And this type of nation is characterised by the properties attributed to it in the fictional text. The fact that this type of nation is in fact exemplified by the nation Russia is accidental: Russia may satisfy (or may have satisfied at the time of Gogol) the description associated with it in *Dead Souls*, or it may not. What is essential, according to Wolterstorff, is that we can extract from Gogol's novel a type of nation that the author attributes to Russia within the novel."[27]

According to this view, when we engage with a fictional context we are not so much identifying a unique object connected to a particular name within the fiction, as entering into contact with a set of properties that, taken together, form what may be defined as a "type".
The context of fiction—whether it refers to an object that exists only within fiction or to one that exists both in fiction and in reality—thus serves to identify a "type" of character or fictional entity. Let us now consider the specific case in which a fictional name refers to something that exists only within the fictional context:

"Let us now consider the name 'Čičikov', introduced by Gogol himself in *Dead Souls*. This name does not refer to any person in our world, yet from the novel we can extract a description that identifies a type of person. The fact that this type of person is not exemplified by any particular individual is irrelevant to the fiction. The novel allows us to associate a type of person with the name 'Čičikov', even though the name does not refer to any person."[28]

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[26] N. Wolterstoff, *Characters and their Names,* in "Poetics", 8, pp.102-127

[27] E. Paganini, *Oggetti e personaggi fittizi: un dibattito filosofico contemporaneo*, Carocci, Roma 2019, pp. 66-67

[28] ibid. p. 67

As we have already noted, within a fictional context a name may refer either to something that exists only within fiction or to something that exists both in fiction and in reality. Fictional objects and characters thus exist as abstract entities, characterised by a certain number of accidents transmitted to us by the fictional context in which they are embedded. Within fiction, therefore, we are told about types of persons that exist eternally in a purely abstract manner, rather than about characters whose existence is accidental and concrete.

A substantially different view is proposed by Gregory Currie[29]. According to Currie, fictional characters are "roles", in the same way that the definite descriptions "the Pope" or "the President of the Italian Republic" designate offices occupied by Robert Francis Prevost and Sergio Mattarella only by historical accident. Proper names thus designate roles that may, from time to time, be occupied by whichever fictional character best exemplifies that role along with all its associated characteristics. Very similar to Currie's theory is that proposed by Andrea Bonomi, who states:

"More than by the name it bears, a character is identified by the set of (relevant) descriptions that connect it to the textual reality: distinctive qualities, mannerisms, relations with other characters, and so on. It is this idea of a role that allows us to compare alternative textual states and thus to identify a character across those states. A mere change of proper name from one version to another does not entail structural alteration. By contrast, intervention upon a role may reverberate throughout the entire textual framework. This explains the mobility of the universe of objects across the various drafts of the *Recherche*."[30]

What emerges unequivocally from all these Platonist theories is that the existence of types and roles —or, more generally, of fictional characters—is directly dependent on linguistic capacity. In short, as we have seen, it is through language that we refer to this kind of abstract entities, which prove relatively easy to describe and grasp intuitively.

Although this theory succeeds admirably in overcoming one of the major problems in the philosophy of language concerning fictional objects, we should nonetheless agree that, the existence of fictional characters cannot be grounded solely in language.

Indeed: "[…] our pre-theoretical intuition is that the existence of fictional entities does not depend solely on language. It is not merely because language is structured in a certain way that fictional

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[29] cfr. G. Currie, *Fictional names,* in "Australian Journal of Philosophy" 66, 4, pp.471-488 and G. Currie, *The Nature of Fiction,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990

[30] A. Bonomi, *Le vie del riferimento,* Bompiani, Milano 1975, p.67

entities exist. An important role must also be attributed to those who introduce fictional stories and to those who engage with them."[31]

This intuition forms the basis of the Creationist theory. Whereas in the Platonist view the author merely identifies types or roles through language, playing no practical role in their existence, in the Creationist (or artefactualist) view the author plays a primary role in the formation of fictional characters.

The first philosopher to develop a Creationist view was the already-mentioned Saul Kripke, who, in order to defend his theory of direct reference[32], articulated a complex account in which fictional names are distinguished according to whether they are used within or outside the fictional context. In the former case, according to Kripke, the name lacks reference; in the latter, it refers to abstract entities dependent upon the actions of human beings who introduce and use names within fiction.

As we have seen, the theory of direct reference stands in opposition to the descriptivist theory advanced by Frege and Russell, according to which a proper name can have a reference only through the mediation of a definite description that replaces it. Thus, according to descriptivism, the name "Robert Francis Prevost" has a reference only insofar as it can be replaced by the definite description "the Pope of the Catholic Church elected in 2025".

According to the theory of direct reference, by contrast, no such mediation is required, since every proper name is introduced into a linguistic community through a baptism and subsequently transmitted by a causal chain.

Kripke's critique of descriptivism is of fundamental importance, as it allows us to understand the point of discontinuity between a proper name and its corresponding definite description. According to Kripke, descriptivism is incapable of accounting for questions such as "Did Moses actually exist?".

The answer that Frege and Russell would have given to such a question is that it is simply meaningless[33]. As we have seen, both authors assume that when we refer to a proper name, the person in question exists or has existed.

But, by introducing the notion of possible worlds, we have stated that existence is not to be understood epistemically—that is, scientifically. According to Kripke, we must therefore draw a fundamental distinction between questions of metaphysical existence and questions of epistemic

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[31] E. Paganini, *Oggetti e personaggi fittizi: un dibattito filosofico contemporaneo*, Carocci, Roma 2019, p.73

[32] S. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity,* Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1980

[33] E. Paganini, *Oggetti e personaggi fittizi: un dibattito filosofico contemporaneo*, Carocci, Roma 2019, p.76

existence[34]. The former concern possible worlds not including our, whereas the latter concern only our own world.

Let us begin, following Kripke, with metaphysical questions and thus with the dialectic of possible worlds. What Kripke seeks to demonstrate is that the proper name "Moses" does not correspond to the definite description "the person who led the Jews out of Egypt". If we consider a possible world PW1 in which no one led the Jews out of Egypt, and we inquire into the existence of Moses, we may encounter a discrepancy between the proper name and the proposed definite description. Moses might exist in PW1, yet have chosen not to lead the Jews out of Egypt. In this case, we would have two statements:

(1) Moses exists.
(2) The person who led the Jews out of Egypt exists.

The first statement would be true, whereas the second would be false. Through the notion of possible worlds, Kripke thus reveals a clear discrepancy between proper name and definite description, thereby exposing a weakness in the descriptivist theory of Frege and Russell[35].

A proper name is therefore not substitutable *salva veritate* for a definite description when we ask the metaphysical question of existence.

When, by contrast, we address existence within our own world, therefore when we ask the epistemic question, we must take into account certain fundamental factors.

First and foremost, existence in our world is contingent. We cannot assume with absolute certainty that everything that exists in our world exists in all possible worlds. My own existence is contingent: there exists at least one possible world in which my parents never met and I was never born. Let us now consider how the question of existence changes when posed within the context of our world—that is, as an epistemic question. Even here, Kripke identifies a discontinuity between proper name and definite description. Once again using the example above, there may be a discrepancy between the statement "Moses exists" and the statement "the person who led the Jews out of Egypt exists". It may be that a person called Moses actually existed, but that everything attributed to him in the *Exodus* is false.

When we ask whether Moses really existed in our world, we are, according to Kripke, asking about baptism: we are inquiring into the origin of the name and the causal chain through which it has

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[34] cfr. S. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity,* Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1980

[35] This example is fully taken from: E. Paganini, *Oggetti e personaggi fittizi: un dibattito filosofico contemporaneo*, Carocci, Roma 2019, pp. 76-77

reached us. The answer will be affirmative if the name was introduced through a baptism within our linguistic community and transmitted by a causal chain; it will be negative otherwise.

Both cases concern the use of an empty name outside the fictional context. But what happens when we use a fictional name within fiction? Clearly, when we use an empty name within a fictional context, we are not referring to a real person; rather, we are pretending that the name refers to someone.There are thus cases in which names have reference and cases in which, despite lacking reference, we pretend that they do.

For Kripke, fictional characters are neither entities that "are" but do not exist (ghosts), nor entities that exist in other possible worlds (possible entities), but rather "abstract entities that inhabit our world and whose existence depends on human actions, namely the production or consumption of works of fiction"[36].

Both Creationists and Platonists, however, regard fictional objects as something real: in the former case dependent on author and audience, in the latter dependent on language.

There are, however, philosophers who regard fictional objects not as real entities to which reference is genuinely made through works of fiction, but as unreal, and who maintain that it is entirely unnecessary to concern ourselves with the existence of such fictional entities.

Returning to Kripke's notion of pretending within the artefactualist framework, we must therefore consider the so-called *pretence theories*, that is, theories grounded in pretending—or, as Walton puts it, in the system of *make-believe*.

It was indeed Kendall Walton who proposed the idea of "pretending"[37]. According to Walton, when we encounter a fictional context—whether literary, artistic, or of any other kind—we are simply engaging in a game of make-believe.

To understand this innovative idea, let us consider a typical children's game. Children use props to pretend that they are somewhere else or doing something else. Suppose, as Walton suggests, that two children are playing a game in which tree stumps in a forest are bears from which they must flee. Both children pretend, through a prop (the stump), that they are escaping bears. The game continues as long as both persist in the pretence. Works of fiction for adults function in the same way[38]. When we stand before Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*, we pretend that it is a raft, whereas it is in fact nothing more than oil paint on canvas.

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[36] ibid. p.81

[37] K.L. Walton, *Mimesis and Make-Believe: on the foundation of representational arts,* Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1990

[38] E. Paganini, *Oggetti e personaggi fittizi: un dibattito filosofico contemporaneo*, Carocci, Roma 2019, p.90

Within this game of pretending, however, there are phenomena that cannot be ignored. First, there is not always an explicit agreement about what game is being played in front of a work of fiction. Unlike the two children in the example above, adults rarely agree in advance on what exactly must be pretended. Certain props therefore generate a principle of generation (stumps become bears) as this principle is applied consciously or unconsciously by participants. This leads to a second observation: anyone who deviates from this principle, and thus from the rules of the game, is either not playing or playing improperly.

Finally, and crucially, there is the concept of truth. For Walton, truth in fiction is constrained by props. The two children are compelled to pretend that there is a bear whenever they see a stump in the forest. This kind of truth, however, is nothing other than a prescription to the imagination: we are compelled to imagine x whenever we see or come into contact with prop y.

We shall conclude here our discussion of the various theories concerning fictional objects. As we hope has emerged from this analysis, it is today more necessary than ever, in the field of new religions, to emphasise the fundamental role of language, and in particular the importance of fictional objects within this context.

Although no single theory conclusively demonstrates what truth in fiction is, or what the actual reference of an empty name may be, these ideas ought to be constitutive of a contemporary theological debate, as we shall see in the final stage of this study.

The Ophidian linguistic position: language as access to God

Having described the main theories that analyse the nature of fictional names, it is now necessary to explain the position that Ophidism holds regarding this issue, for it is essential for the ophidian philosophy to understand and explain what we do say when we say "God".

In this regard, there is no doubt that the name "God" is what is called, within the context of philosophy of language, an "empty name", having no tangible object designated by it.

However, the problem is understanding what is the real nature of such a noun; it is to say, if by saying "God" we are referring to a fictional name, as in the case of "Anna Karenina", or, on another level we are referring to something else, whose nature is still to be comprehended.

As we have described throughout the last pages of this study regarding S. Kripke's distinction between metaphysical and epistemic questions[39], there is a fundamental distinction between asking about the existence of an object in a possible world and asking about its existence within our own

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[39] S. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity,* Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1980

world. Moreover, it has been proven to be essential, to distinguish between the existence of a empty name within the context of fiction and outside of it.

Said that, it is undeniable that the name "God" is profoundly different from other empty names of fictional characters since it does not refer to a specific context of fiction.

Differently from names as "Anna Karenina" or "Sherlock Holmes", in fact, the name "God" does not originate from a fictional baptism in a clear context of fiction, not being created by a single author but rather being sedimented through a causal chain of "assumptions of existence" that have transformed this theoretical name in a proper name. The first premise that shall be made is therefore related to this difference.

A second premise is instead related to the context in which the proper name "God" is placed. By using Paganini's positions[40] on the context of fiction and the prefix "such-and-such story", we can argue that, in the specific case of Ophidism, the prefix changes from the aforementioned to "such-and-such spiritual practice". In this way, theology can be seen as a semantics of the role and the name "God" is a role that must be identified in order to give a sense to the metaphysical speculation. This type of theoretical attitude does not deprive "God" of its intrinsic importance, rather it identifies God as necessary abstract artifact. By shifting the focus from the epistemic question of existence to the functional role within a linguistic and ritual community, Ophidism accounts for the "truth-aptness" of religious discourse without falling into metaphysical contradictions.

Finally, using Walton's idea of *make-believe*[41], we can argue that the ritual context proposed by Ophidism is not just a game, but a principle that generates inter-fictional truth. Through the ophidian language we are not describing an entity but we are compelling an imaginary. In this way, even if some may see "God" as an empty name from an epistemic point of view, this would be irrelevant from its own plenitude within the context of *make-believe* that generates the religious reality.

Moreover, building upon the distinction between intra-fictional and inter-fictional truths, Ophidism operates through a selective importation of properties related to the name "God". Just as the figure of the witch in the proposed example carries the inter-fictional object of the "broom" across different narratives, the name "God" in Ophidism inherits certain nuclear properties from the classical theological tradition to maintain linguistic continuity and reference. However, by applying the semantics of the role that we just described, Ophidism redefines the "role" of God within its own spiritual practice and according to its own philosophy. This allows the ophidian discourse to be

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[40] E. Paganini, *Oggetti e personaggi fittizi: un dibattito filosofico contemporaneo*, Carocci, Roma 2019

[41] K.L. Walton, *Mimesis and Make-Believe: on the foundation of representational arts,* Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1990

true in a non-trivial sense; it is true within the specific *make-believe* system of the Ophidian liturgy, where the name "God" works as a necessary abstract artifact that organizes the community's metaphysical and moral landscape.

In conclusion, the description of "God" as an empty name within the Ophidian linguistic framework, does not entail a denial of Its metaphysical reality. Rather, it acknowledges the epistemic abyss between the human language and the Divine Essence. Following Kripke's distinction[42], while "God" may be functionally empty in our world due to the absence of a direct and tangible baptism, It remains a metaphysically necessary entity. The name "God" thus acts as a semantic bridge; an abstract artifact generated by spiritual practice that allows the community to point towards an Unknowable Referent. In this sense, Ophidism does not treat God as a fictional character, but treats religious language as a necessary *make-believe* system designed to facilitate an encounter with a Being that is as real as it is beyond any possible human description. The fullness of God is therefore found in the tension between the emptiness of the signifier and the absolute presence of the signified.

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[42] S. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity,* Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1980